World Chronicle

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and Armed Conflict
United Nations

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CHILDREN AND WAR

Today, in 50 countries around the world, children are suffering in the midst of armed conflict and in its aftermath: children being killed; children being made orphans; children being maimed; children being uprooted from their homes; children being raped and sexually abused; children being deprived of education and health care; children being exploited as child soldiers; and children left with deep emotional scars and traumas. On this episode of **World Chronicle**, Under-Secretary-General Olara Otunnu, United Nations' Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, talks about what is being done to help millions of children affected by conflict.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Just recently, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution calling on all nations to do more to protect children in war zones. Over the last decade, two million children around the world have been killed in wars, one million orphaned, six million seriously injured, and over ten million left suffering with grave psychological trauma. The toll is mostly the result of civil conflicts that have escalated since the end of the Cold War in places such as Sierra Leone, Angola, Liberia, Sudan, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, Colombia and Afghanistan.

Our guest today is an expert on this issue. He is Under-Secretary-General Olara Otunnu, United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. He will be interviewed by Evgueni Menkes *of RIA "Novosti"* and James Bone of *The Times of London*.

Mr. Otunnu, welcome to **World Chronicle.**

OTUNNU: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Otunnu, reading some of the material that was provided for this programme one feels almost as if we should have a warning for the television audience and radio listeners because of the terrible things that are described in these accounts that you have been investigating and trying to do something about. We've identified a number of countries that are particularly prone to this sort of terrible phenomenon but I believe there are many more. How widespread is it?

OTUNNU: First of all the scope of the problem is big. We are talking of children being killed and being maimed, children being made orphans, young girls being sexually abused, about the deep trauma that children inherit from being exposed to violence, about children being used in this very cynical way as child solders. We are talking about displacement of civilian populations, the vast majority of whom are children and women so it's a huge scope of a problem, and we are talking of a problem which is not confined to one or two areas of the world. None of these things are any longer exceptional. It is widespread across the globe. As we speak, in some 30 countries some aspects of what we've been describing is going on. So it's an abomination. It's a worldwide abomination that requires not just warning but mobilization, socio-political mobilization on a massive scale to reverse

this abomination.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is this a recent thing? I mean one hasn't heard about it very much until relatively recently and of course it's not getting the attention that it deserves in the media.

OTUNNU: Well war isn't new. Human society has always known war. The abuse of civilian populations isn't new but the scale, the nature, the magnitude of what we are witnessing is relatively new. And in my view it is partly to do with a qualitative shift in the nature of warfare itself. What do I mean? Most of the wars we are witnessing today are internal. They are unfolding within national boundaries. They play....

LITTLEJOHNS: But why should that make children more vulnerable?

OTUNNU: No because they play not two groups against each other but several factions with varying control over their forces. There are wars in which the traditional laws of warfare, international rules of warfare, are not applying because they are not known but where traditional systems that conducted the warfare has been completely shattered and so a kind of a free-for-all which we are witnessing, the demonization of the other community to annihilate it, not just to disable it.

LITTLEJOHNS: So you really need a new international convention?

OTUNNU: We need..... No the rules we have, the rules we have at the international level – the Geneva Convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – at the local levels too. We have local values that traditionally have provided for injunctions and taboos against attacks on children and women. It wasn't a free-for-all even traditionally. There were rules that regulated the conduct of warfare.

LITTLEJOHNS: But now it is a free-for-all.

OTUNNU: And the tragedy we are witnessing today is that the international norms have not taken root. What had grown on the local soil that provided ethical orientation in warfare has been broken as a result of protracted warfare. So it's a free-for-all. A kind of ethical vacuum. That is why we need to launch, in my view, an era, a new era for the application of these norms, both international norms and the local values, which have been shattered under pressure of war.

MENKES: Mr. Otunnu, let me ask you a personal question. I remember you very well in the early '80s as a bright star of African and international diplomacy, a representative

of your own country to the United Nations, President of the Security Council, a kingmaker who opened the way for Mr. Perez de Cuellar to become the Secretary-General of the United Nations. A flamboyant, sharply political ambassador. What brought you to this humanitarian field? What makes you a person who is well equipped to tackle this issue?

OTUNNU: I have since the very beginning been deeply attached to children because I grew up in a society among the Acholi people where children are placed on a particular pedestal. Parents will sacrifice anything for the benefit of their children, to feed them, to give them education. They lived for their children. It's the other extreme if you like. I grew up in a home in which an addition to my siblings, there were always any number of cousins and nephews. My mother was running a kind of a boarding house if you like in our home. A lot of children. And so I've always been very attached to children. But also in all my earlier work on human rights, in peace and security, in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, constantly what came up was the disproportionate victimization of children and women. And then, of course, when Madame Graca Machel was asked to prepare this special study on the impact of armed conflict on children she assembled a small number of people to help her in this work and I was one of the foot soldiers who helped her prepare the report and that deepened further my interest in this area of work. And I was very fortunate to have been asked by the Secretary-General to take the place of Madame Graca Machel to mobilize for action on the issues she raised in her compelling report on the impact of war on children.

MENKES: Since when does your office exist and how many people do you have actually who work on this issue?

OTUNNU: The actual office was created at the end of 1996 by the General Assembly but I was appointed towards the end of 1997. So it's almost two years that I've been doing this. It's a very small office because the office, our operational office – it isn't a department within the UN, this is a project really – it's an office to conduct advocacy, to raise awareness internationally on this issue, to mobilize for action. So I've got three professional people who are now working with me and several consultants who are working with me as well.

MENKES: Doesn't it sometimes feel that your role is more of a ceremonial one than a role of person or of an office which can really deal with this problem and move it somewhere further ahead?

OTUNNU: Oh it's anything but ceremonial. What we have to distinguish is, I

think, between the work of operational agencies and actors, like UNICEF, like the High Commission for Refugees, like the World Food Programme, the international and local NGOs who work on the ground. They provide for the orphans, they provide for the demobilization of children who are being used as child soldiers. They help traumatized children. And my work is to highlight the issues on which they work and to mobilize for support for their role on the ground. There are many examples we can now cite from the action in the Security Council, action the European Union, action by various governments, commitment by insurgency groups and governments alike to take certain measures to protect children. There are a number of very concrete measures which have now marked the two years of this mandate and I'm happy to discuss this more fully.

BONE: Olara, Graca Machel is always given credit for bringing this to the fore at the United Nations. Obviously, former wife of Samora Machel of Mozambique and of Nelson Mandela, but as I remember....

LITTLEJOHNS: Present wife of Nelson Mandela.

BONE: That's right. As I remember it, it was actually James Jonah who was at one time the highest ranking African in the UN system who went back to his homeland, Sierra Leone, and came back shocked and told the Security Council how the rebels were enlisting children, filling them full of crack cocaine and giving them a Kalashnikov and sending them out onto the streets. And recently I read a report by the UN on Sierra Leone that said 12 percent of the combatants in Sierra Leone are children. And I gather you've been recently to Sierra Leone, what were your impressions of that country?

OTUNNU : First of all in terms of the origins of this project the origins actually go back to UNICEF and the Committee for the Rights of the Child. The idea came from those two sources to have a special project and then the Secretary-General was asked to appoint an eminent person, Madame Graca Machel, to conduct the report. The report was very much supported in the preparation by UNICEF, by the High Commissioner for Refugees and by the High Commissioner for Human Rights. And then of course, since my appointment, all this is now being brought together under the Office of the Special Representative. Going back to Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone is clearly one of the countries where children have suffered unbelievably in the eight-year war. Children who have been maimed, the cutting off of hands and limbs. A whole new community of persons have emerged in Sierra Leone – those without limbs. Young girls who have been sexually abused. The abduction of young people.

In Freetown alone in the month of January when the rebels had incursions into the city, more than 4,000 young persons were abducted and less than 1,000 have been released up till now. So one, the issues on which we are working is to get behind rebel lines and seek the release of these children who have been abducted. Of course, as in every situation of this kind the number of children who are traumatized by what they have witnessed, the children who have lost out on their education, on their youth – Sierra Leone is one of the countries in which children have suffered the most, not to mention the use of children as child soldiers. We estimate something close to 10,000 young persons have been used by the various fighting groups as child soldiers. So the experience of Sierra Leone has been horrific for children. The children of Sierra Leone suffered beyond belief and I believe that apart from the two imperatives, the two preoccupations of reestablishing a measure of security back in Sierra Leone and putting the peace process on track, ending the war once and for all, apart from these two preoccupations, the most important challenge facing Sierra Leone today is what they call the crisis of the children. How to respond to this massive dislocation, disorientation and the destructive process in which children have been caught in Sierra Leone is a reason why I have come up with a 15-point agenda, an agenda for action to assist the children of Sierra Leone.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Under-Secretary-General Olara Otunnu, United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. Ambassador Otunnu, how do you account for the fact that these terrible things that are going on in Sierra Leone are largely unreported? Apart from the wire service accounts there's nothing on mass media at all to speak of.

OTUNNU: It's partly that the attention of the international community is short and tends to focus at one crisis at a time. Today it's Kosovo, tomorrow maybe East Timor, the following day maybe somewhere else. But it's difficult for the international community to have an attention span which encompasses all the key areas of suffering. But it's also the fact that the international community is not yet as aware as they should be; that what we are witnessing in the world today is not war as we've known it in the modern era. It's something qualitatively different. What children are being subjected to in Sierra Leone, Columbia, Sudan, Kosovo is not war as we have known it and this realization needs to come home much more clearly. And finally I got this very striking – during my visit to Sierra Leone I was so struck how well informed the Sierra Leonean people are, especially children, about

Kosovo. At every turn they asked me about my two visits to Kosovo, about the agenda which I've put forth for the children of Kosovo. They told me about the response of the international community and challenged me to explain the perceived differential treatment in terms of response and attitude, vis-a-vis the children of Sierra Leone and the children of Kosovo. So part of the challenge out of all this is that to preserve our solidarity, the solidarity of the international community, to preserve the credibility of the international community it is so important that we be seen to respond similarly to similar situations of need and suffering, especially as it concerns children. It's very important.

LITTLEJOHNS: So what you're saying is that the children of Sierra Leone are better informed, more interested in what's going on in the world than the average child in the United States?

OTUNNU: Very definitely so. Certainly they're all tuned to the BBC, to Voice of America, to Radio France Internationale. I remember this kid in a refugee camp in Guinea who cited to me facts, figures in US dollars of how many dollars and cents were being spent on a Kosovo child and how many on a Sierra Leonean child. I thought he was kidding. Then he told me when I challenged him where did you get this information, he said BBC. They have a little transistor radio, people gather around and word spread. That's how they're connected to the outside world. It is the other side of globalization.

MENKES: Coming back for a second to Sierra Leone the other day I heard a report that the leaders of the rebels went back, returned to the capital, and that they apologized to the people of the country for what their combatants did. Apologized! Are we talking in terms of an apology for all what happened?

OTUNNU: Well, I am relieved they did that. Part of the issue that I raise so strongly in Sierra Leone and since my return was my appeal addressed to the rebel leaders that they must level with the children of Sierra Leone. They must acknowledge fully their role in the incredible atrocities that were committed against the people of Sierra Leone. At the very least they must level with them and acknowledge their role in that. They had not up till now so I was very relieved to hear that on their return finally that message seems to have got across and they told the Sierra Leonean people that they were sorry for what they did. It's a very important development.

MENKES: Somebody must be responsible for what happened.

OTUNNU: Oh very definitely so but.....

MENKES: And punished.

OTUNNU: Oh it's very important in the context of any situation that there should be no impunity for atrocities committed. But right now I think the preoccupation of the Sierra Leonean people above all are two things: one, they want to be absolutely sure that the atrocities have been brought to an end, that the war has been brought to an end. Nobody was in a position to protect them against the atrocities. Not their own government, not the international community. So naturally they were brought to their knees. I remember discussing with them on several occasions and what they would tell me inevitably is, we had to swallow bitter pill. We had to swallow our pride. We had to do whatever it took to bring this war to an end. To bring the atrocities to an end. That's priority number one for them. To be sure that this will not recur. That the war is over. Secondly, they want to see a measure of credible security and that translates into collecting the arms from the fighting group. These are the two most important things. The other things will follow. So it's important for the international community, which is in a position at the moment to keep that flame alive, to keep the issue of accountability and the issue of responsibility alive. The Sierra Leonean people for themselves are not in a position to do that right now.

BONE: Olara, let me ask you a couple of things about your office just to come back to your particular role. I would first like to ask you a question that I asked Graca Machel at this very table several years ago when she proposed the creation of your office which is why isn't your job a job that UNICEF not only can do but should have been doing all along?

OTUNNU: No, the answer is very clear that we are talking about a set of activities which involves UNICEF for sure, it involves the High Commissioner for Refugees because a lot of the children we are talking about are in refugee camps. They are displaced children. It involves World Food Programme that feeds these children. It involves the High Commissioner for Human Rights because there's a very important human rights component. It involves a whole myriad, a whole community of NGOs, non-governmental organizations, both local and international. Which is to say it involves the European Union. The European Commission is very deeply involved at the frontline of this issue so there are a number of actors who are involved at the level of advocacy but also the level of activities on the ground. And that's why it was thought important to have one central spot, one central focal point that works with all these actors and makes this issue a central, cross-sectoral issue.

BONE: A couple of other questions. When you took the post you insisted, and I've heard Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, tell this story that it wasn't just children in warfare that you were the representative for children and warfare. Why do you want such a broad mandate? Why is it important?

OTUNNU: No it's not a question of broadness it's a question of specificity. My mandates deal with the impact of armed conflict on children. I do preventive work. I highlight the importance of observing norms which should prevent children from being victimized. I address situations where wars are going on in the midst of conflict. But equally significantly I address post-conflict situations where war has ended but where the impact, the legacy of the war is still tremendous on children. That's why in Sierra Leone the war has ended, Kosovo the war has ended, in Central America the war has ended but my work is as important as ever to ensure that in the post-conflict phase children don't get shortchanged.

BONE: One more question. Your particular office I gather is supported by private funding, or at least voluntary funding, so it's not part of the UN regular budget and it's also being set up as I understand for a limited initial period. I believe that's four years but correct me if that's....

OTUNNU: Three years.

BONE: Three years.

OTUNNU: Three years is the initial period.

BONE: So the question really arises will you have funding for a period beyond the first three years? Will your office continue beyond its initial three-year mandate?

OTUNNU: The mandate was set up by the General Assembly. The office and the mandate of the General Assembly so it's up to the General Asssembly to decide if it wishes to extend the mandate beyond the initial three years. My own view is very clear that this office should not become a permament feature of the UN system, that this office should play the role of catalyst, the role of setting in place a certain culture, a certain approach, a critical mass of activities in favour of children and then thereafter leave it for the actors – for UNICEF, for the High Commission for Refugees, for the governments, for the NGOs to carry forward that work in a natural, routine way.

BONE: So three years is enough basically? Three years is enough?

OTUNNU: That's not for me to say but I'm just saying that this should no be an indefinite permanent structure. How long is enough to set in plce the critical mass of activity,

the culture, the approach, the attitude of mind, the highlighting of the fate of children affected by war in the Security Council, with UN agencies, with NGOs, with governments I don't know. But it should be for a definitive period of time not indefinite. And then, you know, finally the General Assembly when the three year period is over will obviously discuss this matter and decide what they want to do beyond the three years.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Otunnu,we've talked a lot about Sierra Leone but what about some other countries where these terrible happenings are occuring? I saw in one of the reports that teenagers had beheaded a girl in Algeria and were playing football with the severed head. You know this is thend of thing which defies belief. I mean after Sierra Leone which countries are the worst would you say?

OTUNNU: No we're talking about a number of countries. We're talking about Sri Lanka, we're talking about Colombia, about Sudan, about Burundi, about Kosovo, about Afghanistan, about the situation in Chechnya. We're talking about a large number of countries where terrible things are happening because civil wars are going on and within that context children are being abused. I just got back not very long ago from Colombia. Colombia is one of the countries with-year war in which children haveeen worst affected. Within the country it's about 1.5 million people displaced, the vast majority of whom are children. Over 60 percent of whom are children. No access to education, no access to health facilities, no documentation. They are completely trapped in the midst of this warfare and this war has gone on for 40 years. We talk about Kosovo. When I visited Kosovo September of 1998, the province, but also this year in April when I went to Albania and Macedonia to see those expelled from Kosovo, the worst affected in terms of trauma, in terms of health and survival issues and disruption of education, the indoctrination that children go through in the context of war were children. The challenge today within Kosovo if we are not able to meet adequately the needs of children bring them a sense of reconciliation, address their trauma, their schooling needs, we won't have succeeded in Kosovo. The same is true in Sri Lanka. I visited Sri Lanka, among the countries in which it's the worst use of young persons as child soldiers....

LITTLEJOHNS: By the Tamils or by.....

OTUNNU: No it's..... I met with the Tamil, the LTTE, the Tamil Tigers, the leadership and they had committed to not recruiting children below the age of 17 and not deploying them below the age of 18.

MENKES: Is there any way to check on that whether they.....

OTUNNU: We are monitoring this and I'm in communication with them. I've already sent them a communication in the course of this year indicating that evidence shows that there's continued to be the recruitment and use of children as child soldiers within their ranks.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Otunnu ,the United States is not being very helpful in this situation by resisting the idea of limiting child soldiers to 18. They want to keep it at 15. Why is that?

OTUNNU: First of all let me emphasize that when we talk about protecting children affected by war we are talking more than child soldiers. We are talking about children who are being killed and maimed. We are talking about young girls who are being sexually abused. We are talking about a huge number of people uprooted and displaced. We are talking about those suffering from trauma, those who are losing on education. So child soldiers is only one aspect of it. The US has been very supportive of all these other aspects of our activities. It contributes a lot to UNICEF, to the High Commission for Refugees, to help the children who are affected on the ground. The one area where we have a difference and where dialogue continues is on the issue of raising the age limit for recruitment into armed forces. I advocate raising the age limit to 18 from the present 15. The US has reservation about the age limit being raised to 18 but the dialogue continues on that issue. But in all other aspects that I'm describing the US is very active and very supportive.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Otunnu that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Under-Secretary-General Olara Otunnu, United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. He was interviewed by Evgueni Menkes of *Ria "Novosti"* and James Bone of *The Times of London*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.